



Influencers cost Soldiers their lives

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FORT RUCKER, Ala. (June 12, 2007) – In February, two Soldiers died in a rollover accident in Iraq when the M1114 HMMWV they were operating rolled into a canal. Though the Soldiers drowned, preliminary reports suggest they were driving under the influence ... but not of alcohol.

Driving under the influence doesn't always involve drinking alcohol. Drugs and other items can impair drivers and render them incapable of safely operating vehicles, as is the case in this report.

Initial findings from the accident suggest the Soldiers "huffed" before driving the government vehicle. Huffing is a term people use to describe the action of intentionally inhaling aerosols or chemical vapors to attain a "high" or gain some euphoric effect. According to NIDA, drugs, aerosols, chemical vapors and other items used to obtain this feeling act on the brain and alter perception, balance, coordination and other motor skills required for safe driving.

The symptoms of drugged driving may have gone undetected in the past, said Sergeant Danny Lamm of the Impaired Driving Unit at the California Highway Patrol academy; however, enforcement measures are now in place to detect such hazardous practices.

Unfortunately, a trend is now emerging as a result of the improved detection methods – incidents of drugged driving are on the rise.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration reports that 16,000 people are killed annually because of drunk and drugged driving. NHTSA also estimates that drugs are used by about 10 to 22 percent of drivers involved in accidents, often in combination with alcohol.

Prescription, over-the-counter, illicit and unrecognized drugs all have potential reactions with alcohol. The National Institute on Drug Abuse reports that drugged driving is a public health concern because it puts not only the driver at risk, but it also places passengers and others who share the road with them at risk.

In some situations, intoxicated passengers can cause fatal accidents, as is the case in a March privately owned vehicle accident that killed one Soldier in Tennessee. A Soldier was traveling with two other Soldiers when he reportedly lost control of his privately owned vehicle and crashed into a tree. However, reports indicate that a backseat passenger reached forward and grabbed the steering wheel.

Impaired judgment, uncoordinated body movements, blurred vision and slurred speech are just a few of the effects alcohol and drugs have on people. Just one drink is known to impair mental and physical abilities.

Sergeant Lamm said he has witnessed numerous cognizant, levelheaded people choose to have a few drinks, decide to drive and become remorseful when they are arrested for driving under the influence. The sad reality, however, is that Lamm and other law enforcement professionals aren't always able to remove impaired drivers from the streets before someone dies.

For example, in FY 06, an Army captain died in Iowa after losing control of his motorcycle,

slamming into a chain-link fence and tumbling end-over-end more than a dozen times. The investigation revealed that he was driving under the influence. His blood alcohol concentration was .289, and he chose to leave the bar and not wear a helmet.

“Soldiers must take care of each other and battle to stay in the fight,” Lt. Col. Randall K. Cheeseborough, chief ground task force for the U.S. Army Combat Readiness Center said. “Develop a plan of attack before heading out for a night on the town, and make sound decisions before drinking.”

“The use of battle buddies, designated drivers and taxis are cheaper than the cost of a DUI or fatality,” Cheeseborough added. “Though Soldiers can face punishment by their chain of command, the ultimate loss could be that of a life. What influence would you rather drive under?”

For more information on drunk or drugged driving awareness and prevention, visit www.madd.org or www.nida.nih.gov.